

Narrator: Erin Scooler

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Interviewer: Tony Karwacki

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ES: Okay, so we're going to start with where you grew up and how you got into fishing.

TK: I grew up here in Darien. My Dad, he's been a commercial fisherman his whole life and I... Basically since I was probably about 5 years old I've been in the boat with him. And I remember having to stand on a five gallon bucket to look over the console to drive the boat when I was little. And when I was 14 I was in my own boat pulling my own set of crab traps. At the age of 14. And I'm 36 now and still doing it.

ES: So were you like the captain of that boat at 14?

TK: Mmhmm

ES: And so what kind of fishing do you do? Fishing? Crabbing?

TK: Blue crabs

ES: Blue crabs? And how would you describe the community of Darien how fishing has... How is fishing a part of the community in Darien as a whole?

TK: To me the fishing community is pretty much what makes up Darien. As long as I can remember there've been shrimp boats around. I've worked on shrimp boats with other captains and stuff during school breaks and summers and stuff. If I didn't go crabbin' I was on the shrimp boat shrimpin'. One of the ones that I was on was Hal Boone's boat and I was probably about 12 years old and it was December. Cold water shrimp fell out in cold water season. Let's go shrimpin'. Let's go. So I got on the boat with him and his crew, and we worked, clocking it 24 hours a day. I was on the back deck all night long pickin' up shrimp with his crew. It was cold. It was like freezing to me. The second night he was tired so he pulled me off the deck and had me drive the boat, at night. [inaudible] had the old paper plotters then. Didn't have GPS like we do now. Those old paper plotters. He says "Follow these lines down to the end of the sheet, turn the boat around and go back the other way. And watch your radar, make sure you don't hit nobody and look out the windows, make sure you don't hit nobody." He went to bed for like 4 hours and I was sittin' there at 12 years old driving the 60 ft shrimp boat. But as far as other jobs in the

community, I mean there's other jobs but if you look around enough a good many of them are based around the commercial fishing industry around here. Like the mall out there, you know it failed.

ES: So, your father was a fisherman. How long has your family been in fishing and how do you think that influenced you?

TK: My dad he's the first generation of fishermen. His dad does something completely different. Told him that he would never make it. Never amount to anything in commercial fishing. We moved down here to Darien when I was 6 months old. My parents are originally from Maryland. He crabbed up there and dove under the ice for oysters in the winter time. You know, I done all that up there and when they had the spill on 3 mile Island he packed up and he left. And this is where we ended up. And he started crabbing and as I grew up it's something that I enjoy and I continue to do it.

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ES: Do you sell your crabs independently? You don't sell them to a dock?

TK: Cut out the middle man you make more money. You got the trucks that run up and down the road hauling the crabs from Maryland. I'll give you an example. Last summer there was a crabber sittin' there talking about how price was up. He was getting a dollar and a quarter for his large crabs. You know per pound. I said "Good for you. I can drive to Jacksonville, put mine on an airplane and I'm getting three fifty a pound for em'." Cut out the middle man. They're going straight to the store, so you make more money.

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ES: How are you seeing the fishing industry changing?

TK: As far as catch quantity and whatnot?

ES: Catch quantity [inaudible]

TK: Overall, what I see from where I'm at, on the shrimping industry side. There's not very many young people gettin' into it. My friends that have shrimp boats and stuff they have a hard time finding reliable crew members. And the overall profit, listening to them talk, is not what it used to be. As far as crab markets go the weather has, whether you got a wet year or a dry year, has a lot to depend on that [inaudible]. You got plenty of water. Crabs are more of a brackish water type deal. if it's too salty they don't live in it. If it's too fresh the don't live in it. in on that because I've got plenty of of a practical guide to solving. So they go where the water salinity is right for them. and over the past 15-20 years you're startin' to see more and more of our crab gear, especially when the water warms up summer time, sea turtles eatin' on our traps and killing the crabs. So, you know, we got that to deal with and certain times of year you got the porpoise coming through and he's flippin' traps trying to steal the bait out of your traps. So once he rolls a trap on its side it don't catch.

We have have our battles with whether it's mother nature related or human related. It's people stealing your crabs. You got the chemicals people use to [inaudible] golf courses and mosquito sprays and different stuff. Several years ago we was at a DNR meeting and there was a guy there talking about the mosquito spray they use and how it kills the mosquito larvae. We told him. We said "What about your crab larvae, your shrimp larvae, your fish. You know all that other stuff. He said "Oh it doesn't effect them." So let's get all this larvae and put it in a 5 gallon bucket, put your chemical in there and see what happens. "We can't do that." It's a lot of checks and balances. It's not the volume of crabs it used to be when there was pickin' houses and stuff, but pickin' houses aren't around anymore and you've got a live market so there's only so much supply and demand. If you got a whole bunch of crabs then people start giving them away just so they can go to work at a lower price. But you still don't make nothing, so I got my bottom dollar set where this is where you can't pay this I'm not going to work. I'm not interested in going to work for free.

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TK: And it's, you know, in with the fresh water around here. You know if it rains up in Atlanta, they built the dams where they used to use the dams to regulate the river water for the barge traffic coming from the coast going up to central Georgia. Well now they use the damns to hold

back for their drinking water up there and they say, "well, you got all this water down here." If it's salt water your crabs and shrimp and everything, they back up. And like the shrimpers they can't come in the sounds and shrimp. You have to shrimp back in the sounds. So you know they hold it for drinking water when we need it for our livelihood. It's one of those things that you know where the small man on the bottom of the totem pole and basically they tell us, we don't matter.

ES: What are some things that you'd like to see happen as the years go on, like the changes you'd like to see in the industry?

TK: Less government regulation and different penalties for people that are caught stealing crabs. Here in Georgia, we've had several people they got caught before. That one got throat slap out of court and Judge says "You can't tell one crab trap from another. They all look the same." And basically dismissed the case. There's been several other people call it. They get a couple hundred dollar fine. Back in November I went to court on a case that was almost two years old where I had a group of people that were stealing my crabs like five, six days a week. I mean repetitive and that judge there, I was very pleased with what he'd done. The one guy, he got 30 days in Glenn County Detention Center and another guy got 30 days and it was another guy that was with another group of people that some other stuff and went on and the rest of them didn't get to come to court, but he got like 90 days in Glen County detention center, thousand dollar fine, three years probation, two years banned from boating or fishing in Glenn County. I mean he got a good stiff one.

ES: So, is it primarily other crabbers who will steal...

TK: No, this was recreational people.

ES: Okay. Would you say that's one of the bigger problems you face is people stealing your crabs?

TK: Yep, that it is.

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DR: Do you feel any responsibility or any desire to like teach another generation of crabbers?

TK: No, cause what generally happens is... Like with shrimp trawlers. Everybody trawls together like in different spots and stuff. Well, with crabbing it's a little different. Your license for the state of Georgia says you can go anywhere in the state of Georgia that you want to go. With crabbers it's more of a code. "This is my area that I work." "This is your area that you work." And everybody's got their places where they put their traps and places that they stop. You come up with other crabbers and I don't go past this point, you don't come past that point. If you got a group of people that get along real well it works out great. Everybody gets along. He's catching crabs up there, but you know what? They're in the river. They move. When it's my turn to catch them and he's not catching nothing he don't come down on me. I've seen it with some younger people that have tried it and stuff. And they got an attitude of "I can do what I want and you need to just get out my way." And that doesn't go over very well with people that's been there for many years and then it becomes a problem and people lose a lot of gear and a lot of money.

DR: What do you mean?

TK: Traps get cut off. And it's who can outlast who?

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TK: Most of the younger people don't want to work that hard nowadays. Wintertime it's freezing cold. Right after like three days after the snow was over, I was back out there in the boat, working. Cold. Summertime it's a hundred degrees outside, so you're in the heat and you're in the cold. You know, uh, was it Monday? Was it Monday? No, Tuesday. When that front come through Tuesday with the wind blowing. I had a few more traps left out there off the beach that I had to pick up miles out there when that wind picked up 30 miles an hour and I was out there know a mile and a half offshore out there with the boat full of crab traps and I had to come home. So, it gets interesting at times. There's just a lot of people don't have the work ethic nowadays. To really want to do it.

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TK: Most kids, they would skip school to go to the beach, have fun or do whatever they wanted to do. Which my parents always knew when I wasn't going to school. What I called my "skipping school" was to go to work. They called me up, you know like the cold water shrimp, "we're going out for a couple of day you want to go?" I'm in school, you know, I'd leave. Gone. Same thing with crabbing. I was home DCT. Got out of work, know, got out of school, early to go to work. In the fall of the year we were catching up with the cast net. They was on certain tides, so I would go to school for a little bit or whatever. Then I'd leave. I'd go throw cast net. Go make my money for the day. When we had to fill out all the paperwork for, you know, whether he showed up to work on time and you know, you got back from your lunch breaks and this, that, and the other. You know, you're supposed to give it to your employer for your employer to fill out. Well, I fill my own out. I'd turn it in. After about third time I turned it in. My DCT teacher, he says "Tony you can't do that." I says "What do you mean?" He says "You got to give it to your employer." I says, "I am my employer." He says, "no." He says, "you gotta give it to somebody to fill out." I says "there's nobody else in the boat with me to fill it out." I said, "I'm by myself." He says, "well, you need to get your mom or somebody to fill it out." He said, "because you can't fill it out by yourself on yourself." I said, "OK." So, I had to have my mom fill it out because they wouldn't let me fill out my own stuff. My principal one year though, talking about the shrimp in the fall of the year, he want learn how to cast net shrimp. So I told him, I said, yeah, so we're catching shrimp right now. And he says, uh, "well, Friday." He says, "What'd be a good time Friday to go castin'?" I told him, I said, "well, low waters, like, 10:30 in the morning." I says "need to be in the water at 9:00." I know to catch in low water for when the shrimp's the best. He said "when you get to school, you go to your home room class." He said "8:30, I'm coming to get you." And he did, at 8:30 he come down there. He pulled me out of class, we walked out and got to his truck and he had the boat hooked his truck and we got in his truck and we left school for the day. We went shrimpin'. That was my schoolin' for the day is I went shrimpin' with the principal.

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TK: The ones that are doing it now are the ones that... We skipped school to go to work. You have some younger. The younger generations, they try it and they hang in there for a little while, but a lot of people see the money that comes in but they don't see the money that goes out. If you get to keep 25 cents on the dollar you've had a pretty good year. And a lot of people don't see that. They say, "Oh, you went out and you made \$500 today." But wait, I gotta buy traps or a new motor, new pop puller, you know, or other equipment. At the end of the year it gets tight.

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ES: Has that been a change since when you started, was it that crabbing could've supported you and now it's not so much or the same as when you started crabbing?

TK: It's somewhat the same? You know, you gotta be somewhat diverse in what you're doing with it. With your no soft shell crabs and different things that's in the industry. You got to be able to basically adapt to what's going on. If you have a good year you put money back that way if you have a bad year next year, you blow a motor up or something, you know, you can get yourself through the bad times versus you're good times. And uh, you know, for somebody that's just getting started in it they need to manage their money well, `because you might get started on a really good year and say "I made real good this year." But, January one rolls around and you get a snow storm come through or something happens, you know, you might not catch another crab for three months. You don't know what your next paycheck's gonna be. I might go to work today and make \$100. I might go to work tomorrow and not make a dollar after I pay my bait and gas or, you know, go to work and do real good or go to work and go backwards. Not even pay my bait and gas. You got to be able to put your money back when you make good money.

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